



JENNIFER M. GRANHOLM
GOVERNOR

STATE OF MICHIGAN
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
LANSING



MICHAEL P. FLANAGAN
SUPERINTENDENT OF
PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

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TO: State Board of Education

FROM: Michael P. Flanagan 

SUBJECT: Legislative Update

Probably the most significant legislative activity during October and early November was the opportunity I had to talk to the House and Senate Education Committees. In September when I spoke to the Senate Education Committee, I focused my comments on high school restructuring and graduation requirements. The prime difference between the two presentations was that in my October 26 presentation to the House Education Committee, we were essentially a month closer to the November 15 State Board of Education meeting. As a result, we had a better understanding of how the Department's presentation to the State Board has evolved and could provide a slightly more detailed presentation.

I felt the House Education Committee was receptive to the direction the State Board and the Governor have discussed in the past few months. Chairman Palmer (R-Romeo), in particular, expressed a deep desire to move forward with legislation that would raise the bar regarding statewide high school graduation requirements. Legislators from both political parties indicated support for change. Of course, as with any proposal, the devil is in the details. Nevertheless, the interest expressed by the committee was encouraging. I was also impressed with the broad scope of questions and concerns raised by members, which ranged from the administrative costs to administer potential mandates, to the alignment of mandates to assessment tests. I indicated to the committee that I would be returning to provide a more detailed review of the recommendations.

Other Legislative Issues

International Baccalaureate Assistance. Representative Stakoe (R-Highland) is the sponsor of HB 4835, a bill that would provide \$1.5 million of financial assistance each fiscal year to school districts for a maximum of up to four years to provide start up costs in their efforts to apply for either high school or middle school International Baccalaureate (IB) programs.

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The funds for this program would come from the state School Aid Fund. The legislation also requires the creation of a five-person advisory committee consisting of representatives from the Department, the International Baccalaureate Program, an International Baccalaureate organization, a local school district superintendent, and a person designated by the Governor. The Department is to award these grants based on consultation with the advisory committee.

As reported by the House Appropriations Committee, the legislation was reduced to a grant of \$250,000 per year. Each grant would be \$125,000 per year for up to four years, effectively limiting the program to two applicants. The Department is currently aware of three school districts planning to apply for an IB program - the Highland School District, the Saginaw Township School District, and the Lansing School District.

The Department has indicated that while IB programs are admirable and we want to encourage school districts to explore these options, this legislation raises serious concerns. First, it is funded through the School Aid Fund. The Department has suggested that a source outside the School Aid Fund should be found to provide dedicated funding for this legislation. As written, the legislation is committing the School Aid Fund for up to four years of funding for this program. There is no guarantee that funding will be available or appropriated in each of the next four fiscal years. Second, there are significant administrative costs to the Department, which simply cannot be absorbed by the current appropriation.

Scientific Method to Evaluate Scientific Theories. In October, the State Board of Education took a position of non-support of HB 5251, introduced by Representative John Moolenaar (R-Midland). Since mid-October, Bob Morris, Jeremy Hughes, and myself have had separate meetings to discuss this legislation with Rep. Moolenaar. While he is extremely interested in pursuing this legislation, he has indicated a willingness for the Department to further explore the issue of teaching controversial issues, particularly as such issues relate to the scientific method. Department staff is currently conducting a search to determine if other states have policy regarding the teaching of controversial subjects. It is my hope that we can amicably resolve this issue with Rep. Moolenaar, without the need for legislation.

As always, please do not hesitate to contact Bob Morris or myself with any questions regarding this memorandum or other legislative matters. In addition, Bob Morris will be providing members with an update of this document at the upcoming Board meeting.